Crime

Electronic 'Phreaks' Wreak Havoc On Nation's Large Computer System

By JEFFREY PERLMAN and DEBI A. HASTINGS
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LOS ANGELES — During a party at a Hollywood pizza parlor one Saturday night last May, Kevin Mitnick, 17, Lewis DePayne, 21, and Mark Ross, 25, decided to drive to Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co.'s downtown Los Angeles computer center and paw through trash.

They were looking for discarded correspondence and computer printouts bearing confidential codes and account numbers. With them, the trio could wreak havoc on the telephone company and its computer systems. Such search missions had worked before, Mitnick later told authorities.

They did not stop at rummaging through trash.

Court records quoting Mitnick in statements to the FBI say they pretended to be on a phone company tour, entered the center and stole several important computer manuals. The three were arrested last summer and charged with a variety of crimes. Through their attorneys, all three declined comment.

What seems especially noteworthy to authorities is that these young men say they were doing it for kicks. And what happend at PT&T appears to be only a sample of what those who understand complex telephone and computer systems can do.

Mitnick, for example, also was charged with gaining access to a private San Francisco company's computer. The company initially estimated that it would cost $250,000 to reprogram information that had been lost or altered.

And Mitnick told the FBI that he had obtained sensitive data from "The Ark," Digital Equipment Co.'s main computer in Maynard, Mass.

Indeed, what emerges from court records and interviews is a subculture of about 150 people in California, many of them teen-agers, who have used telephones and computers in illegal ways. Computer pranksters are suspected — or have claimed responsibility — in:

—Shutting Pacific Telephone's directory assistance service in the Pasadena, Calif., area twice in recent weeks.

—Obtaining records from the computer of the California Department of Motor Vehicles.

—Obtaining confidential credit information from a major Southeren California credit bureau's computer.

Theft of PT&T's computer manuals could have enabled Mitnick and his friends to shut much of the phone service in the Los Angeles area, a district attorney's investigator recently speculated, and PT&T has fired the security firm that had been guarding some of its offices.

What's more, by Mitnick's account to the FBI, Mitnick and his friends had gained unauthorized access to computers all over the United States — computers supposedly impenetrable to all but selected people who know the codes and passwords to make the computers respond, like keys that unlock doors.

Computer pranksters obtain those "keys" by posing as company employees, by rummaging through company trash, or simply by trial and error, using likely combinations of words and numbers. Companies using computers, it seems, have a limited imagination when it comes to codes and passwords, and few firms bother to pay the $50,000 and more that it costs to install special scramblers to protect computerized data.

The computer "phreaks" use computers to arrange sexual encounters, trade equipment and information about the latest computer games, and to share electronic espionage and sabotage techniques.

There are clubs, newsletters and electronic bulletin boards, and the participants often adopt nickname identities, much like citizens' band radio users. Computer play is a hobby to many, but it occasionally crosses into more serious pranks.

A computer bulletin board called "Apple Cider" was used to transmit a death threat to a San Gabriel, Calif., woman, who is expected to testify in the trial of one of Mitnick's codefendants. The source of the threat could not be traced, authorities said.

Donn Parker, an author and computer crimes specialist at Stanford Research Institute in Palo Alto, Calif., calls computer pranking part of a "serious, widespred, international problem."

Parker said the phenomenon hit home for him when his 14-year-old son was victimized by fellow students who were able to "talk" to their school computer and change grade transcripts.

"These are technological trespassers," Parker said. "They often do it just for the sheer joy of destruction. It looks fairly benign at first, but then some of them go on to more serious crime."

Authorities say there was no law specifically making it illegal to gain access to someone else's computer until 1980, when a law sought by business and prosecutors took effect.

The new law, Penal Code section 502-C, states:

"Any person who maliciously accesses, alters, deletes, damages or destroys any computer system, computer network, computer program or data shall be guilty of a public offense."

Some lawyers say the new felony statute covers any computer access gained without permission. But others say it applies only to efforts to "vex, harass or destroy," not to unauthorized look-sees.

Some companies previously victimized by computer fraud, such as TRW Credit Data, have increased security by changing their operating procedures and by installing sophisticated equipment, but many others seem not to care.

Pranksters seem bent on proving they can do almost anything with computers and phone lines, and engage in one-upmanship.

"These are people who are experiment prone," said Bruce Goldstein, a computer system security consulant in San Francisco.

"To me it's an ethical issue. It stems from what students in high schools and universities are being trained to do.

"It's the mentality that pervades the universities and their computer 'crash' clubs, where the students are actually taught how to crash (destroy) a computer program. Instead of teaching them how to crash a computer, they should teach them a lot more about how to prevent it."

Public court records quote Mitnick, now 18, telling authorities that he and other pranksters discussed trying to gain access to the national computer network known as NCIC, which processes criminal intelligence information for law enforcement agencies.

"...I called the police station and they gave me their code, but I never tried to get into it," Mitnick said, according to court documents.

However, Bruce Patton, a friend of Mitnick, told The Times that computer "phreaks" have obtained access to NCIC, and have run names through it without destroying or modifying data.

"I was there when they did it," Patton said.

Known as "Bruce of Irvine" on electronic bulletin boards, Patton, 28, is a self-described "phone phreak."

He called a Times reporter late one night and asked "What would you say if I told you I knew a format to type someone's phone service out of existence?"

Patton — with a Times reporter listening in — used a law firm's computer to communicate with a Pacific Telephone computer and read back supposedly private information about The Times' telephones. Patton said he is now cooperating with phone company officials.

Where did Patton come from? How did he get into phone and computer "phreaking?"

A telephone and computer specialist who maintains data systems for a Southern California law firm, Patton said, "Most of us (computer pranksters) started out as bored kids."

"I didn't go to high school or college. I dropped out in the sixth grade...I worked on ranches, took care of horses. I bugged people's telephones and stole equipment from the phone company."

Mitnick told authorities that a high school friend triggered his interest in computers in the 10th grade. Soon a group of friends started spending all of their spare time playing computer games.

Then in May 1980, Mitnick and another juvenile were caught by University of California Los Angeles campus police using campus computers and phone lines to "talk" to computers at the University of Southern California and elsewhere.

Among the items found on the juveniles:

Computer printouts of their UCLA transactions, a false Pacific Telephone employee identification badge, and a homemade black code book showing how to gain access by phone to various computers, including airline ticket sales and reservation systems.

Art Longo, a UCLA police detective who worked the case, said of the black code book confiscated from the two juveniles.

"It must have taken years of hard work to collect the numbers and information they had in it."

But Patton said he sees such efforts as fun, not work, and added:

"It's very addictive. Sometimes it's better than sex."

Janitorial Firm Lodges Lawsuit

The sum of $35,000 is sought in a lawsuit filed at the courthouse by Robert Nemeth, trading as Robert's Janitorial Service, 125 E. Broad St., Hazleton.

Defendant is Hazleton Insurance Center, Inc., 25 E. Broad St., Hazleton.

It is stated that a contract was made with the State Department of Transportation on Dec. 16, 1977, and the service agreement called for work at two rest areas along Interstate Route 81.

A bond is required, it is stated, and arrangements were made with the defendant. It is claimed that PennDOT cancelled the contract because the Hazleton Insurance Center, Inc., failed to prepare and provide the bond.

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Boyd-Dodson Sixth Graders Intra-mural Champs

In a unique program sponsored by Wilkes-Barre Area School District, Boyd-Dodson Elementary School Sixth Grade class won the intra-mural soccer championship.

The program, under supervision of Harry Vogt, intra-mural director and vice principal of Kistler School, had five schools participating in the tournament: Dodson, S & S, Kistler, Bear Creek and Mackin.

In each school, teams were made up of classes and the winning class would participate against the winning class of other schools. In the tournament final, Dodson defeated S & S, 1-0 in overtime. Teacher of the winning class is Thomas Palfey, while Thomas Moore is teacher of the S & S finalist class. Herbert Dutt is physical education teacher at Dodson and Debbie Trubela is physical education instructor at S & S.

Soccer champions, first row: left to right: JoAnn Jeziorski, April Wilde, Barbara Ayers, Lisa Sabatino, Coreen Perks, John Charneski, Lou Bitonti, Sean Hagan. Second row: Pascale Lakkis, Melissa Thompson, Saretha Wade, Michelle Biniek, Kim Barnes, Andy Wanat, Scott Callahan, Anthony Martinelli, Steve Laird, Paul Goy. Third row: Joanne miller, Lisa Wasielewski, Jennifer Correll, Judy Flaherty, Chani Mitchneck, Tracy Malay, Michael Kehoe, James Belcastro, Steve Hall, Brian Kaminski.

Supervisors standing, from left: in back row: Chet Wasilewski, athletic director of Wilkes-Barre Area School District; Vogt, Joseph Obeid, principal; Herbert Dutt, Thomas Palfey.

Postal Service Offers Mint Set

A hard-cover, case-bound Americana Mint Set album has been put on sale by the U.S. Postal Service.

The new philatelic product, a 52-page album featuring photographs and background on 27 Americiana Series definitive postage stamps, also is available by mail order from the Philatelic Sales Division, Washington, D.C.

The album contains 24 of the 27 stamps in the Americana Series, which has begun in December 1977. The three stamps the album does not contain are the nine-cent, the 7.9-cent and the 7.7-cent coil stamps. These were not available to the Postal Service in sufficient quantity for inclusion in the albums.

All stamps in the Americana Series have a similar design concept. They emphasize subjects relating to the history and culture of the United States and the designs also feature "wrap-around" lettering. When four theme-related stamps are placed together, they form a "picture frame." For example, one grouping highlights the four freedoms guaranteed in our nation's Bill of Rights — the "freedom of the press," the nation's Bill of Rights — the "freedom of the press," the "right of the people peaceably to assemble," the "right of petition for redress," and "freedom of conscience."

The album also features appropriate quotations from historic and distinguished American leaders with regard to the ideals upon which the United States of America was founded and developed.

The Postal Service also announced that the Americana Series mint set album, which sells for $14, is being issued in a limited edition.

Mail orders should be addressed to the Postal Service's Philatelic Sales Division, Washington, D.C. 20265-9997. Customers ordering the album from the sales division should note that there is a 50-cent postage and handling fee.

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